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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the nature of "community," provides several examples of what such a community looks like in elementary schools, builds a case for the importance of family-school relationships in the building of community, and describes the family conference as one approach for building a community of learners. Data are based on 2 years of research in six New York city public alternative elementary schools. The schools are members of the Center for Collaborative Education. Data collection included observation; interviews with faculty, students, and family members; and document analysis. These schools respected the wisdom of families and their role in the education of youth. The schools sought to include families in the education of their children through pre-enrollment community-outreach programs and innovative admission procedures. Another way in which the schools engaged families in the school community was through the family conference, which avoided placing blame and focused instead on working together to help the child attain success in school. The goal of the conference was to involve parents and families in the support of their child in the school environment. Examples of interaction among students, teachers, and families are described. (LMI)

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FAMILY CONFERENCES:
HOLDING ONESELF ACCOUNTABLE FOR COMMUNITY

Paper Presented at AERA Annual Conference
New Orleans, LA April, 1994

Jon D. Snyder

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FAMILY CONFERENCES:
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One of the more popular catch phrases in the worlds of education is "classrooms as communities of learners." This paper will stake out a position on the nature of "community," provide several examples of what such a "community" looks like in elementary schools, build a case for the importance of family-school relationships in the building of community, and finally describe the "Family Conference" as one approach to use in the building of a community of learners.

The material presented is based upon two years of research in six public alternative elementary schools in New York City. All six are members of the Center for Collaborative Education without whose support this work would not have been possible. Data gathering included: observations of classrooms, family conferences, and faculty gatherings; interviews with faculty, students, and family members; review of school and classroom documents and artifacts; and review of the small, but useful, literature on family conferences.

Introduction

The essence of community is a belief that all people have innate worth, that each individual possesses the spectrum of human possibility. In a community, all members are capable of, indeed responsible for, creating an environment where people are trusted and respected. Responsibility requires power. Thus, everyone -- students, staff, and families -- must possess the power to control their lives, must have options of their own design. Accountability is accepting the daunting challenge of holding oneself, one's colleagues, and one's school responsible for, and responsive to, the students, families, and staff in their care. It means not only that one's own child (and family) is treated with trust and respect and provided a nurturing educational environment in which to grow -- but that this holds for every child because that is perhaps the most important lesson a child can learn in school. Trust and respect mean that

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every member of the school community believes passionately that every student wants to, and has the ability to, make sense of his/her world. It means that teachers believe passionately that content -- the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they have to share -- will help students make sense of their world. Finally it means that teachers accept the awe-ful responsibility not to tell students what the world means, but to help them understand what the world means -- to construct their own lives, because that is what learning is.

A community can only be created by its members. It emerges and changes in the particularity of specific contexts. No matter how much desired, community cannot be prescribed, predicted, or imposed. It can only be achieved with and over time: time to establish and continually re-establish the trust and respect necessary to its evolution; time to make who one is as an individual and as an institution visible to oneself and others. Community is much more than just getting along with each other. It is the shared commitment to enact common values, to create a different kind of place for people to work and live together -- and all the angst that involves. The primordial soup out of which community emerges consists of equal parts of the inalterable commitment that all people have value, and, opportunities, the power, to express their value in their school lives.

Community is not an accident. Power does not come with a magic wand. Compassion, though deeply engrained in the human psyche, does not spontaneously generate. In the schools studied students, families, school staff, and central office personnel were given the opportunity to be valuable. Rituals, celebrations, informal conversations, and school wide projects provide the environment, and the time, to get together, share good news and sad news, pleasures and worries, birthdays and business news, personal achievements and anxieties ... as a community, in the company of powerful people.

Community played itself out differently in each of the schools and within each of the classrooms. In each, however, the reality is measured against values. These values are ideals and therefore difficult, if not impossible, to achieve, yet everything that happens throughout the day is

mediated by them. The proof of the pudding is not that these schools and the classrooms within them hold the power to meet and craft what they are, or even the caliber of that crafting, but what goes on daily -- how their values are lived. It is in the time consuming mundaneity of the day-to-day that values are lived -- especially in the specific mechanisms they use to insure that parent knowledge is valued and finds its way into the school.

What Community Looks Like

In the heart of Spanish Harlem, it is a four flight trudge up a dank stairwell to the floor of an ancient school building where Central Park East II Elementary School resides. Upper grade students -- measuring, discussing, and writing -- sprawl across the hallway, spanning two wall displays. One display is of lab reports labeled "A Science Experiment - Using Our Senses To Do Science" -- descriptions of experiments identifying mystery powders. The other display is of figurines made of scraps of plastic and tin. Inside an open door, kindergarten students are working in groups, singing, working with pattern blocks, cooking. In one corner, three girls play on their hands and knees, scooting around a five foot high block structure. Another girl quietly warns them not to knock the structure down. They continue chasing each other, but respectfully never come close to bumping the blocks. Off to one side of the hall, two upper grade girls are huddled in intense negotiation of a personal issue: Laurie had picked Nancy to cook with her and Sarah is sad. Sarah asks, "Why didn't you pick me to cook with you today?" Laurie answers, "I picked Nancy because she asked me to pick her, and she never gets to cook." Sarah plaintively pleads, "We're best friends." But Laurie has no recourse beyond remorse, "I'm sorry." Nancy joins the twosome and she and Laurie head to the cooking area where they will spend several hours working intimately together. Sarah goes to the art table to work on her project. She glances forlornly at the two girls cooking together. Laurie catches her eye and with a shrug draws attention to Nancy's joy. Sarah nods in return and sets to work.

The hallway serves as a fluid center of community intimacy. Rather than the sacrosanct silence of a meditating monastery, it is full of people

and their work. It may be students bouncing a ball to each other while wearing an eye patch performing an experiment on dominant eye and hand relationships; a trio on African percussion instruments; a school sing; groups of students building a totem pole; a class of the little ones bundling out the door for a winter field trip; or seven mural painters. It may be a parent and a teacher in a strategic huddle about a child, or two parents sharing developmental milestones, or two teachers working through a scheduling switch so one's students can perform for the others, or the director smiling the halls with her presence. The hallways are the arteries of community and they pulse with transaction and energy.

There is no such thing as a trivial accomplishment in a community. At CPE II one afternoon, Gary, the kindergarten teacher, charged into the director's office shouting excitedly, "Kyle, Kyle, come quick. You'll love this. You have to see it." Kyle and Gary ran to the room where four boys were standing proudly next to a four foot block structure balancing precariously on a two block foundation. Susan, the resource room teacher, hearing the commotion and knowing what it meant, rushed into the classroom with a camera. Celebratory pictures were taken of the boys next to the structure; Kyle and Gary next to the structure; and the entire class gathered around the structure. Not only did Gary drop everything to come get Kyle, but Kyle and Susan dropped everything to share a success. The attention and enthusiasm was not contrived -- and neither was the energy with which those two boys bounded up the four flights of stairs the next morning to begin another day of school.

There is a danger of losing the informality of roles and relationships that are characteristic of community. There is, for instance, the informality of the emotional messiness that accompanies human endeavor. Metaphorically emblematic of the "all mushed-upness" of community, is the role of the Kindergarten class at CPE II to signify lunch time. From the director's office/health center occupying a room in the center of the hall to the most remote corner closet, lunch officially begins not with a belligerent bell, but with Gary's class exuberantly singing Heh Dum Diddly as they marchingly pour down the stairs to the cafeteria. The informality does not indicate chaos but rather the pervasive sense of vital fun,

intimate freedom, and serious playfulness that comes when everybody in a school knows what they are about, when an entire school community has only one responsibility -- by teaching and by learning to support the growth and development of every other member of the school community.

During project time in Laurie's third/fourth grade classroom, the students move freely and purposefully through the room pushing their work to conclusion. Many class meetings were held earlier in the project to negotiate what the students wanted to know and do -- where the class began exploring the ideas that would shape their work and in turn, the work would shape the ideas. In addition, the meetings continually re-established norms of behaviour, standards of excellence, and links with pre-existing knowledge and experience.

During project time, children execute their ideas and experiment with their own thinking and emerging understandings along the way. At the pottery station, three girls and a boy make clay pots -- pounding the clay to be rolled, carving a design onto the exterior, looking through a book on Native American art to spur their own ideas. The discussion centers on the fragility of pottery. "Mine keeps breaking. How did they [Native Americans] do it?"

At the sewing table, a girl sews two pieces of brown cloth together with yarn. Laurie demonstrates a different stitch which is quickly picked up by the student who proceeds much more rapidly as a result.

Laurie moves to the woodworking corner where a boy and a girl saw twigs off branches. In a short time a spear and a bow take shape. They locate a vegetable peeler from the cooking area and remove the bark. Then they sand their weapons to smoothness.

Sitting individually at a table a young boy slowly slides a knife in and out of a leather sheath, his eyes focused inward. When questioned out of his reverie, he says he made the sheath himself and is now working on the knife. "I'm making a knife from this bone. It's supposed to be from a buffalo rib, but there weren't any of those in Central Park, so Laurie

brought me this rib bone from a cow." Another student passes by, "That's neat. You're making a knife from a bone!" The knife maker turns inward again and questions, aloud but to no one in particular, "Those Indians were very smart. What confuses me is how they made the buildings." He goes back to sliding the knife in and out of the sheath. "How did they make it all stick together?" Laurie hears the question from across the room and makes her way over to the table. "What is cement made of?" she asks. "Water and sand." "Did Native Americans have water and sand?" "The Indians were very smart." he repeats, nodding his head in amazement.

At still another table, three boys sit discussing fur trading between Native Americans and Euro-Americans. "What would they get for the furs?" "They could trade them for horses ..." "That's a good idea." "... and spears and guns!"

The knife maker moves to a window to sit, a little drowsily, in the rays of the sun. Laurie suggests a test of the knife's sharpness. Several students circle around the scene. Laurie gently rubs a strip of yarn across the bone and, with little strain, the knife cuts it. Mouths drop open in amazement. A student brings over a small strip of bark and the bone cuts it in half as well. Eyes widen and mouths open further. More students circle the scene and they annoint the knife maker with expert status. Laurie explains how the knives were used for skinning animals and cutting the meat -- emphasizing the skill required to make and use knives appropriately. "Yup," says the knife maker nodding his head sagely, "Those Indians were pretty smart."

These are the communities of American mythology: where the entire community knows and cares; where if a child is caught approaching a wrong-doing the closest person, child or adult, takes responsibility for steering the potential wrong-doer onto a positive path. Every person in these schools is known. When students give tours, their intimate knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of teachers, the high fives they share with the younger students, and the subtle steering of younger students to where they are supposed to be leaves the visitors in gaping mouthed wonderment. Commented one, "It's amazing that they know so

much about the whole school. It's even more amazing that they care so much."

At River East a second grade teacher, running side-by-side with a disheveled looking child, burst into the Director's Office. The director was meeting with two researchers from Columbia University, but when she saw the paper the teacher was waving, and the beaming boy, she leapt to her feet. "Just a minute, I have to give him a hug." She led the boy into the hallway where she shared the paper, her pleasure, and the boy's gap toothed grinning pride with all who had gathered there. The seven year old boy, a resident of a homeless shelter who never knew for certain when he left school each day where he would sleep that night, had, for the first time, in painfully manuscripted letters, correctly spelled his name.

The Role of Family-School Relationships in Building Community

One factor in making these schools the communities of learning they are is the recognition by the "school people" that the home enters the school each morning and that the school goes home with the child each afternoon. In fact, homes and families often serve as the content for thematic units, as well as the "content" of some classrooms. For instance, Dani's primary classroom at River East has a dramatic play area furnished with a combination kitchen-dining room replete with a sink, stove, kitchen utensils, round table, chairs, table cloth, and dining utensils. One corner resembles a bedroom with three dolls, snugly tucked under blankets, sleeping in a rocking crib. Carmen sets the table, placing silverware and napkins along with the dishes then bustles to the stove, telephone to her ear.

"I'm cooking eggs and bacon and celery for dinner. It's for Jay."

Jay joins in, "I'm playing with my friends. They're invisible, ofcourse."

"When I finish cooking, I'll call you." Hanging up the phone and turning to the observer, Carmen explains, "He's my son," and pointing to the three dolls in the crib, "and these are my babies. This one is a ... " Carmen pauses and then lifts the clothing of one doll, "is a boy. After dinner, I'll help Jay

with his math homework. Then when he's ready to go to sleep, I'll read him a bedtime story."

After dinner, while Jay is doing his math homework, Carmen folds the laundry, "My back is killing me." she sighs.

These school communities know and appreciate the knowledge and wisdom of families and that the school cannot do its job without that knowledge and wisdom. One parent noted,

> The classroom level of collaboration means taking an active role in my child's learning process. For example, calling up the advisor or teacher if my child is having difficulty with an assignment. Sometimes parents feel intimidated by teachers, but we as parents are our children's first teachers. It's important to know this and to be empowered by it -- and to realize how much we have to contribute. [Linda Colon]

They do all they can to include families in the school education of their children and in the life of the school. They do this not by telling families how to parent, but by working with families to support the children they share. As Vivian Wallace of CPE I says:

> I always assume that it is my role to work on building the relationships with families. Sometimes it takes longer with some, but I want to know what their children talk about at home, what trips they have liked to take, how they spend time at home, what they like to do. When we have family conferences, it is because we all want to think together about a particular child.

Respect for the wisdom of families and their role in the education of youth is embedded in the very marrow of school practices. Significant family engagement in the school communities is enhanced from pre-enrollment community outreach and admission procedures that engage families in the school life of their children at its very inception; through reporting and conferencing mechanisms that provide structures and processes that create and maintain a partnership of parity among all participants in a child's life; to the focused and consistent attention to the needs of individual children.

Family-school relationships are systematically furthered by the myriad manners through which teachers communicate with families.

- As with most schools, the most formal communication with families is the report card. In these communities, the report cards are extended narrative reports which include student comments on their own strengths, growth, and interests as well as guiding questions for family input and responses.

- Twice yearly family conferences (elaborated in the following section).

- Each classroom and each school sends home newsletters on a regular basis. These do not solicit cookies for the up-coming bake sale but rather deal with teaching and learning and the significant intersections between school and home.

- In addition to the on-going class newsletters, most teachers send home "curriculum letters," up-dating families on recent happenings, clueing them into directions for the future, and requesting whatever knowledge and materials families and/or community resources might bring to the education of their children.

- Families are encouraged to contact the teachers. To personalize relations between home and school, the schools put out a "school directory" with the names and phone numbers of faculty and staff as well as the names and numbers of all families who wish to be included. River East publishes a yearly calendar designed by the students and listing every community member's birthday.

- Efforts to build constructive relationships with families take many "traditional" forms as well. The schools hold potlucks, pizza parties, evening performances by students, volleyball nights, and a host of other activities. At the more "business like" events (such as recruiting sessions, sixth grade parent information night, and steering committee meetings) the schools provide child care.

- Most importantly, focused and consistent attention to the needs of individual children engenders engagement. Families know their children are safe, trusted, and respected. A Brooklyn New School parent captured the essence of the emotional security, the mutuality of care, that enables genuine family engagement in the schools and the school lives of their children: "What's going to get parents ... is that their kid will be treated with respect. And that is going to change him -- and you."

The essence of each of these processes for building constructive relationships between school and family is reciprocity. The schools are not telling the families how to live their lives nor are the families telling schools how to do their business either. Each party, as possessor of recognized strengths and common interests in the children who bind them, support each other. In such a situation, giving help is the same as asking for help. For instance, families at PS 234 requested adult computer training. Once proficient on computers, the adults used their skills to support the school's computer needs. When Red Hook families were not attending Brooklyn New School steering committee meetings, the school altered the time and the location of the meetings. Nothing helped until the school requested the aid of parents in setting up and running the school library. Not only was the library up and running, but once there, the school had the opportunity to "hear," act upon, and utilize the strengths and desires of the parents who were not attending the more formal steering committee meetings.

Intense conflicts can arise in the attempt to match a vision of parent engagement in the life of the school with the reality of existing attitudes and practice. In any school, let alone ones as intentionally heterogeneous as these six, parent and teacher values are rarely congruent. Rather than dismiss, defend, or defile conflicting parental perspectives, the staffs seek ways to incorporate them into classroom practices, conceptions of accountability, and communication mechanisms. For instance, the Primary Language Record Project, a set of systematic, informal, descriptive assessment instruments, is creating methods for finding out how families

feel about the school and, especially, what and how they think about their children's growth. Though these school communities have used family conferences for years, families and teachers are looking at the processes in more depth, seeking to refine them, as well as evaluating different assessment techniques and data. They continuously ask themselves, "How can parents understand the school and the school's notions of development? What do families need and want? How do family and teacher needs and wants differ? How are they the same? When school and family views are in tension, how can that tension be resolved constructively?"

The Family Conference

One particularly valuable process for genuine engagement of families within the school community is the family conference. The family conference extends the traditional parent-teacher conference to include children, all relevant members of the student's home (including at times siblings and extended family members), and (whenever possible) all members of the school staff with close educational relationships with the student. The inclusion of the student not only gives focus to the conference, it also helps create a supportive atmosphere in which the student actually sees the home and the school coming together over the child's school experience. These parties come together neither to cast blame nor to tell anyone what they should do, but rather to clarify common strengths of, and goals for, the student; develop action plans; and insure communication and collaborative follow-up in order to support the child's learning at school. Family conferences provide an opportunity to share information, hopes, strengths, problems, and plans in an environment of care and an attitude of "We'll all in this together."

The multiple benefits of including the larger "support team" for the student include: increased sense of personal responsibility and community support; reduced threat and anxiety; and enhanced school-family collaboration. Two of the many accountability mechanisms that increase the possibility of these benefits is the careful attention given to preparing the school to welcome the families and efforts made to prepare families to participate equally in the conferences. For instance, focusing questions

are provided in advance both to prepare families but also to alleviate the effects of fears about, and personal histories within, schools.

The immensity of information the teachers have about each student inevitably raises questions of how they can possibly keep track of it all. Various teachers use different approaches. Some leave clip boards at each center so as they observe and work with children they can jot down what is happening as it is happening. Others take notes at selected class meetings. Some audio-tape specific class meetings for in-depth analysis. Some keep a computer file for each student and enter significant memories each evening. Still others use some formal recordings as exemplified by the Primary Language Record.

Students, in keeping track of their own progress, also help their teachers -- maintaining folders for math, writing, and reading logs, as well as samples of art work and research. Long before portfolio assessment became the educational flavor of the month, these communities kept "collections." They have always saved samples of student work, dated and with some context added. For the younger children, the teacher usually suggests the specific samples to be saved, but as children age, they tend to decide on their own. The collections are not designed to show "best work," but rather include successive drafts or a series of work around a particular theme. The point is to show "more process, more child. That's why we don't save any single answer items." The collections serve a variety of functions. For instance, some teachers go over the entire collection with their students several times over the course of the year (including work from previous years). Others use the collection as a basis for the student's presentation during the family conference. Individual teachers often look at the collections prior to working with the student. In addition, teachers enjoy looking at the up-dated collections of former students.

With the support of the Family-School Project at the Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy, CPE II has extended the family conference into, in the words of its director, "a central principle of all that we do,

with our students and their families as well as internally with ourselves." Underlying this "central principle" are six assumptions:

- We believe the child, the family, as well as the school is doing the best that they can, and we must acknowledge and support one another. (We don't place blame.)

- Parents genuinely care about their children.

- Family-school meetings are NOT THERAPY, but a way for all the concerned adults to come together to problem solve and support the child.

- Educators can be prepared to do this work.

- All participants in these meetings, including the child, are advocates of the child and his/her successful education.

- These meetings are not to discipline the child, rather to find ways to help the child succeed in school.

In practice, what these assumptions mean is that family conferences can take place anytime -- whenever any member of the child's life wishes to celebrate a success, work through a problem, or just feels the need to touch base. The process is simple. Anyone can call a family conference, either directly or indirectly. In the past, indirect calls for a conference have been a child telling the teacher, "I'm being put up for adoption." or a parent phoning the director with the worry that "I'm afraid I am going to hit my daughter." After a call for a conference, a family-school coordinator (usually the director or the resource room teacher) organizes the meeting: finding a time for all to meet which often involves covering the teacher's class. In addition, the family-school coordinator (FSC) chairs a pre-conference meeting with all relevant staff in order to clarify immediate concerns and set a positive (e.g., non blaming, non-punitive) tone for the conference. The FSC meets the family at the door of the school and escorts them to a private room for the conference. Again at the inception of the conference itself, the FSC greets the family and sets a positive tone for the meeting -- "This is about helping _____ in school." Each person attending shares their concerns/pleasures beginning with the

person who called the meeting. The FSC's role is to facilitate this sharing -- keeping the focus on the "facts" of the situation and the centrality of concern for the child. Following the sharing of concerns and facts, the group comes to a consensus on what the core issues are. They then, one by one, share possible "action plans" to work through those issues. Finally, consensus is reached on an action plan and a "Family Conference Summary" is completed and signed by all participants.

School personnel commented often that the best way to "really understand the school" was to observe a crisis. Thus, rather than describe a "regular" conference, the paper will describe the family conference process arising from a crisis situation.

A distraught young girl and an equally distraught teacher enter the director's (Kyle) office at CPE II.

"Laurie got upset in class and ... just walked out of the class without permission. ... Do you want me to call the mother?"

Kyle responds, with a muted cheerfulness, "I'll take care of it."

"Are you sure? I can call her myself."

Kyle responds again, without blame and without a tone that the teacher might be incapable or insensitive though she is visibly distraught, "I'll take care of it." It is said without complaint, without reprimand, without judgment of either the teacher or the child. It is a simple matter of role responsibility -- Kyle is the member of the student's support team that tends to these matters.

The teacher returns to class and Laurie sits in a chair next to the blue director's chair, rocking vigorously and holding a fist to her mouth. Before Kyle sits next to Laurie, he shuffles a paper from one side of the office to another to give her a chance to be alone for a moment. When he sits down, with the same muted cheerfulness, he asks, "So, what's up?" Laurie, still chewing on her fist, speaks inaudibly while Kyle leans forward listening intently, though unable to hear. Laurie leans into Kyle's chair and before long, they are both standing and hugging each other, Laurie sobbing. Slowly, they sit down together in Kyle's chair, Kyle cradling her as she continues to cry. The sobs last for ten minutes before the resource room

teacher approaches Kyle with another crisis. He tells her, "You will have to deal with it, this is more important right now."

Laurie, still disconsolate and speaking in convulsive gasps, says, "I want to die. I want to crawl under a rock and die."

Kyle looks at her quizzically and asks, "crawl under rock? Can you fit under a rock?"

"I want to hide, to crawl under a rock and hide."

Kyle ponders this for a moment and reaches across his desk to show a framed photograph of a country scene, "This is where I go when I need to hide."

She glances at the photograph, and then in disconnected phrases, continues, "I don't want my mom and dad to fight anymore ... they're always screaming at each other ... It makes me sad. I yell at them and tell them to stop fighting, to please stop fighting ... I held a knife against my neck and told them if they didn't stop fighting, I would kill myself."

Kyle nods, "Did it work? Did they stop fighting?" Laurie nods her head. "Where did you get that idea from, Laurie?

"From watching "Murder She Wrote." Silence. Then Laurie, sadly with furrowed brow, "I want to go home."

Calmly, straightforwardly, "Do you? Do you want to go home?"

"I want to go home, but I can't. My mommy's sad. I want my mommy not to be sad."

After another pause, Kyle asks, by this time with no trace of the muted cheerfulness but only a grieving concern, "Will a family conference help?"

Lauren abruptly answers, "No!"

"Not even a little bit?" holding his finger and thumb minutely apart to signify how little.

"Maybe a teensy bit" making her own finger and thumb even closer together than Kyle's are, "this much."

Kyle locates the mother's work number and phones. As he waits to connect with the mother, Laurie, speaking to no one in particular, and still in disconnected gasps, "I want my mommy. I want to go home to my grandma. ... I want to die ... I don't want my mom to be sad ... My sister

hides in the closet when my mom and dad fight." Kyle begins talking with Laurie's mother, and Laurie listens intently. "Laurie walked out of her classroom today without her teacher's permission, something was bothering her so much that she could not remain in the classroom. Do you know what might be bothering her?" He rephrases this same comment several times, maintaining the same clarifying focus each time. "It's very unusual for her to walk out of class like this. It seems something is bothering her." Eventually, there is a long period of Kyle responding with "uh huh" and "I see." Again he comments that what concerns him is Laurie's leaving class. "Does she see her father?" Pause. "How is she when she comes back, upbeat? upset? cheerful?" By the end of the conversation, a family conference is scheduled for the following day.

As Kyle hangs up he glances over to Laurie who has wandered to the other side of book case from Kyle's desk where she reads aloud to a younger student who is lying on the health room bed. Walking down the hall to check in on the suspended crisis, Kyle explains:

> You notice I didn't tell Laurie's mother what she had said which would have brought in questions of deciphering truth from untruth ... I know Laurie did not hold a knife to her throat. If she was in that kind of danger a different, more immediate, action is required. The point of calling home is not to judge who is telling the truth, the truth isn't really of interest, the child's success in school is what is of interest. The issue isn't so much what Laurie said, but the fact that she wasn't able to ... succeed in class. ... We keep focused on the concrete issues of the child's success in this environment -- that's our job. It is very tricky getting to the real issues that keep the child from succeeding in school and not to get caught up in the blaming ... you don't want to present information in such a way that the parent feels compelled to blame someone either. ... We try to work together on this in a non-blaming context always with the focus on the child's success in school -- it is not our responsibility to interfere in family business, rather we bring families into support their child in the school business. We are not marriage counselors. The parent is brought in as an essential contributor to the success of their child's development. If families do seem in need of additional services we might ... refer them to other agencies, but it is very important to keep our roles clear.

The point of the story is not solely to grieve for the pain in Laurie's family, but to put a human face on the phrases "community of learners" and "parent engagement." The story captures Laurie's free fall into despair and how it was stopped by a web of shared roles and relationships whose sole purpose was to support her growth and development. The point is Kyle saying of cradling a sobbing student, "This is more important right now." The point is the parent, because she was neither blamed nor threatened, joining forces with the school to strengthen that web. There is still pain in that family, but it no longer paralyzes Laurie's growth and development in school.

Certainly family conferences and the other efforts mentioned to engage families in the formal education of their children and in the life of the school eat time and require considerable expertise. The way to have what we want, however, is to share what we have. When teachers and families share their time, their expertise, and their unabashed love of the children they share, what they have is a cornucopia of riches.

Students learn a tremendous amount from feasting at the cornucopia of community. Those learnings were summarized by the advice Vivian's first and second grade students at CPE I gave to a departing student teacher:

Don't let people hurt one another.
Don't let people tease each other -- and no name calling.
Help students help one another.
When everyone is busy, no one bothers anyone.
Always have fire drills.
Listen to the stories that the children make up.
Listen to children so you can understand them.
Help the children listen to one another.
Let the big kids come to work with the little kids.
Be careful when you take blocks down from a very tall building.